

RAILROAD ADVENTURES IN SARATOGA COUNTY-1865 TO 1883

Summary of the June 2019 SCHR presentation by Bill Bennison

After the Civil War, railroads became recognized as what we today would call a tool for economic development. Several companies in the north emerged from the war both commercially and financially successful. Such success attracted capital from the new American wealth as well as “old money” from industrialized Europe.

The opening of the Transcontinental Railroad, comprised of the Union Pacific Railroad in Omaha, Nebraska, and the Central Pacific Railroad of Sacramento., California encouraged visions of similar systems in the eastern United States. Businessmen and financiers proposed projects to link Portland, Maine and Boston, Massachusetts with Chicago, Illinois. Additionally, the opening of the Hoosac Tunnel in northwestern Massachusetts placed Saratoga County in a strategic position to be part of this phenomenon.

John Alfred Poor from Maine promoted his ill-fated Portland, Rutland, Oswego and Chicago Railroad through Glens Falls and the Sacandaga Valley. Stirred up by local newspapers over the exclusion of Saratoga Springs and Ballston Spa from this project, local businessmen led by George Batcheller attempted to organize their own railroads in the county that would link up with the Hoosac Tunnel. Several companies were organized, but did not get much further than conducting several meetings. One company convinced the Town of Saratoga to issue bonds for its construction and subsequently failed leading to the town’s default on those bonds.

The one “successful” venture came through the efforts of William Burt of Boston. He was the local representative of the Boston, Hoosac Tunnel and Western Railroad owned and financed by the Ames brothers of Boston. The Ames made their fortune providing metal goods to the Union Army and construction equipment to the Union Pacific Railroad. Burt constructed the Saratoga Lake Railroad between Saratoga Springs to Saratoga Lake with extensions to Schuylerville and Mechanicville as part of a grand plan to link Boston to Chicago. That plan failed to materialize after an unfavorable court decision in 1883. Burt’s legacy, the Saratoga Lake Railroad, persisted in several corporate versions until 1955 when, as the Saratoga and Schuylerville Railroad , the line was abandoned and the tracks sold for scrap.